Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA): Bridging Theory and Practice

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Note from the Editors................................................................. p. i-ii

To Define Is to Know................................................................. p. 1
Andrea DeCapua & Helaine W. Marshall

Learner Collaboration in a Multilevel Refugee-Background Classroom ...... p. 19
Emily Marderness

Preparing Teachers to Work with Refugee-Background Students:
Teacher Educator Action Research........................................... p. 43
Melissa Hauber-Ozer & Kathleen Ramos

Teaching Spanish Literacy to Adult Latinx Learners:
Exploring Interest, Impact, and Sustainability ......................... p. 62
Luis Javier Pentón Herrera

Technology-Supported L2 Learning in LESSLA Classes:
Two Case Studies from Finland................................................. p. 86
Taina Tammelin-Laine, Heidi Vaanla, Jenna Savolainen & Minna Bogdanoff

Education and Literacy as Metonymy for English:
Adult Basic Education and Domestic Workers in South Africa .......... p. 108
Anna Kaiper-Marquez

TAP into Workplace Literacy with LESSLA Learners............... p. 126
Shawn Slakk & Joy Kreeft Peyton
NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

LESLLA – Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults – is an international forum of researchers and practitioners who share an interest in the second language (L2) and literacy development of immigrant- and refugee-background adults who are at emergent stages of reading and writing – in any language, including their first language(s). Many have experienced interruptions in formal, school-based learning in their home countries, or have been denied access to such opportunities altogether. Since 2005, LESLLA has gathered each year to share multidisciplinary, multilingual research, pedagogical practices, and education and language policy papers related to this population of L2 adult emergent readers and writers.

The 2019 convening, hosted by Literacy Pittsburgh, marked an important milestone: the 15th Annual LESLLA Symposium. From August 28th to 30th 2019, 150 LESLLA researchers and practitioners from ten countries gathered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (U.S.) to continue this important work. Countries represented included Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Finland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Somalia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Symposium organizing committee included Allegra Elson (Chair), Maria Polinsky (Co-Chair), Lori Como, Sara Cole, Cheryl Garcia, Nicole Pettitt, and Mary Tremonte. We also acknowledge the support of 21 volunteers, six proposal reviewers, the Mayor of Pittsburgh (who declared August 28, 2019 “Literacy education and second language learning for adults day”), as well as Burlington English, University of Michigan Press, the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy (Penn State), and Immigrant Services and Connections, whose support made this symposium possible. Thirty papers, 12 posters, 12 workshops, and two plenaries were presented.

Here, we are pleased to present the proceedings from the 15th Annual LESLLA Symposium. These seven double-blind peer-reviewed papers represent a broad range of LESLLA questions and issues, with myriad implications for practice, policy, and future scholarship. Several authors provide explicit guidance for LESLLA classroom practice: DeCapua and Marshall address teaching the academic language of defining in English—an important academic skill for making
knowledge claims; Marderness provides multiple strategies for facilitating multi-level collaboration in classrooms with LESLLA learners; and Slakk and Peyton delineate a seven-step approach to workplace literacy development for LESLLA learners.

Other authors share scholarship with implications for educational programming and/or classroom practice: Herrera Pentón’s qualitative case study on Spanish L1 literacy programming for Latinx LESLLA learners in the U.S. and Tammelin-Laine, Vaarala, Savolainen and Bogdanoff’s case studies on LESLLA learners’ digital literacy practices in Finland.

Finally, Hauber-Özer and Ramos’s action research at a university-based teacher education program in the U.S. provides insights on preparing preservice teachers to work with refugee-background language learners, and Kaiper-Marquez’s multi-year critical ethnographic study with domestic workers in South Africa asks readers to (re)consider how discourses across contexts (work, home, media, etc.) create and reinforce the notions of “education” as “English education,” and “literacy” as “English literacy,” thus erasing the multilingual and multiliteracies competencies of learners in her study.

We are grateful to the authors and blind reviewers for their time and abundant dedication to seeing these proceedings through to completion, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are confident that teachers, teacher-educators, researchers, and the LESLLA populations they serve will benefit from these authors’ work, and we look forward to further dialogue at the next LESLLA symposium.

Nicole Pettitt, Raichle Farrelly, Allegra Elson, Co-Editors
TAP INTO WORKPLACE LITERACY WITH LESLLA LEARNERS

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Abstract
Adults learning an additional language in their new country of residence, frequently called second language learners and, more recently, emergent bilinguals, can play a valuable role in the workplace in the new country. However, all of these learners, and specifically LESLLA learners, need text-based, vocabulary-specific instruction that will help them navigate through the work they are doing or plan/need to do. Teachers of workplace readiness literacy need to have a set of specific strategies and supports to help learners develop work-related literacy skills. Processing, learning, and using skill-specific, trade-specific, and context-specific vocabulary, often with multiple meanings, must support learners’ comprehension of work-related practices and tasks. There must be multiple opportunities, with correct language use, for learners to learn and engage in the language and related vocabulary that they need to interact with coworkers and clients. This article describes a clear, accessible, seven-element process, “TAP” (Teach, Apply, Practice), that teachers focused on developing LESLLA learners’ workplace readiness skills can follow to help these learners 1) comprehend a job-related text, 2) learn workplace vocabulary in relation to that text, and 3) engage in oral workplace-centered interactions and activities that will help them be better prepared for their jobs. Although many different approaches to teaching workplace literacy are used in adult education classes, as summarized below, teachers often do not have a clear, step-by-step process to follow. The process described was developed and is effectively used in K-12 settings using key elements of second language acquisition strategies and practices for language and literacy development. The steps are described here.

Introduction

Adults learning an additional language in their new country of residence are often referred to as second language learners or language (e.g., English, Finnish, Italian) learners. More recently, in order to recognize that they do, in fact, already know one or more languages and the value of that language/those languages in their lives, they are often referred to as emergent bilinguals (e.g., Garcia et. al., 2008, introduced this term in K-12 education; it is now used to describe all learner populations). These learners can play a valuable role in the workplace in their new country of residence. Sanchez (2019) argued that emergent bilinguals are crucial to any healthy workforce and economy. However, they need support, guidance, and instruction that helps them to build the vocabulary, oral language, and literacy skills that they need to enter and be successful in the workplace. This article describes an approach to workplace literacy instruction with LESLLA learners that teachers can work through step by step, with learners at many different levels of proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, in either their home/native language(s) and or in the new language they are learning, once they are ready for a workplace literacy class. The language used for instruction can be the home/native language or the new language.

The Context for Workplace Literacy Instruction

The primary goal of adult education programs in Europe and the United States is to improve the economic mobility and job preparedness of learners, in order to help them integrate into their new country (e.g., Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Elander et al., 2006; Parrish & Johnson, 2010; Rubio-Festa, 2019; Schaezitz et al., 2019). For example, in the United States, the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRAE) are based on the Common Core State Standards to specifically define what adults learning English need to know and be able to do to participate successfully in academic settings, job training, and civic life. The U.S. Department of Education provides a set of expectations in terms of oral language and literacy at different levels. For example, students should be able to “create clear and coherent level-appropriate speech and text” or “demonstrate
life contexts, and practiced within the context of those situations (Teach, Apply, Practice). Many probabilistic patterns may already be familiar to the learners; for example, that a rising intonation may signal a question. Other paralinguistic cues may not be as familiar or may have culturally different meanings (e.g., a statement that indicates a desire to help; “Call us,” “Contact us,” “Ask me”). Regardless of these variations, these inferential skills need to be modeled, explicitly taught, and included in the “toolkit” that we give learners to “unpack” a text, as needed (Lems et al., 2017, p. 62).

3. Use Learner-Centered, Cooperative Learning Strategies and Supports

After previewing and practicing, learners are ready to begin to read the vocabulary in context, summarize the text (at first repeating after the teacher, and then gradually working in pairs), and discuss the newly acquired vocabulary and content (which, again, is first modeled by the teacher). Each step of the TAP process is explicitly taught and modeled. Supports such as word banks, sentence starters, or cloze-style sentence frames can be used to help the learners with a model of the possible answers without having to produce everything themselves. Each of these supports is contextual to the lesson or the topic and can be source material for teaching, applying, and practicing for future use in lessons and at work. As learners continue to practice, they gradually build confidence that they have the correct pronunciation and a rudimentary comprehension of the words and the text. Reading the real-life-based mentor text amplifies the learners’ ownership of the language and vocabulary in the text and the topic.

Discussing the text with a partner, even if it is simply repeating what they have just read (or later telling each other what work they do in their own jobs), helps learners to access and understand the text. This reading and discussion process is easily facilitated when learners work with a comprehension buddy. In pairs, Buddy A and Buddy B practice reading the text aloud, sentence by sentence, alternating sentences read, and pausing at the end of each sentence to repeat, summarize, or comment on what they have just read (Calderón & Slak, 2018). This buddy work promotes 100 percent participation when the expectation of 100 percent participation is conveyed. Partner work may also be more comfortable for emergent readers, lowering the affective filter.

Over time, they will get to the point where they can read a paragraph or more and summarize at the end of each paragraph.

For emergent readers, this process might start with choral modeling and practice to provide additional support. Emergent readers may work with the teacher, who serves as Buddy A and reads a sentence aloud, and the class acts as Buddy B and orally repeats the sentence. Buddy A (the teacher) reads the next sentence, Buddy B (the group) repeats the sentence, and so on to the end of the paragraph. At the end, the teacher (Buddy A) summarizes what he or she has read. The class (Buddy B) can either repeat the summarization, discuss quickly with a partner, or a variation of both. For this variation of the strategy, mentor text lengths might only be a paragraph long. Thus, each lesson covers less text and is shorter, with more support and the possibility of more focused target vocabulary.

After this initial reading, learners might rotate around the class and ask each other to describe what they do or plan to do at work. As they continue to develop, learners can work on other vocabulary in role-play activities such as interviews, customer service assistance scenarios, and employee-employer exchanges to practice and discuss ways to apply the content and new vocabulary. The teacher can model how to carry out these role-play activities, working with a student. Each of these activities should have the needed vocabulary practiced and previewed, as described earlier in this article. Word banks, sentence starters, or frames as supports also need to mirror each different topic, role-play activity, or scenario.

6. Build from Reading to Writing Activities

Moving further into helping learners engage in understanding and using the new language and vocabulary in the content of the text, writing may also assist in the mastery process for those who are ready to move to writing. Even emergent learners just learning to write and connect sounds to symbols can begin to write when sufficient supports are provided. The vocabulary, reading, summarizing, and discussion activities discussed earlier in this article act as precursors to the opportunity to engage in real-life writing. Other supports may be in the form of sentences to copy, sentence frames to fill in the missing information, or sentence starters to complete. This writing should be based on the vocabulary, reading, and summarizing of the mentor text of the lesson. For adult learners in a workplace literacy class, this might
include completing an employment application, completing a timesheet, or writing a brief note or report to a supervisor.

Filling out a job application and then interviewing for the job takes specific listening and speaking skills and practice. To work on the skills of interviewing and discussing personal skills and work experience, the teacher might provide learners with a handout like the one in Figure 3. First, they fill in the blanks on the left. Then they write a paragraph about the work they do or want to do. Next, they interview another student and fill in the blanks. Eventually, they will interview a partner to practice the skills of listening, speaking, and answering interview-style questions. If they are advanced enough, they might work together to write the friend’s story. The teacher models doing each of these steps on a whiteboard.

Figure 3
Writing and talking about “My Story” (adapted from Wong, 2019, p. 183)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Story</th>
<th>My Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My name is _________.</td>
<td>What is your name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My job is _____________.</td>
<td>What is your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(or I’m a ____________).</td>
<td>When do you work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work on/for ___________.</td>
<td>Where do you work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work at ___________.</td>
<td>What skills/tools do you use for work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my job I ________, ________, ________, and ___________.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Friend’s Story</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My friend is ________. He/She is a ___________.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/She works at/for ___________. He/She works on/at _________. (day/time). He/She uses ________ (skills/tools) ________ for her work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The writing graphic organizer known as R.A.F.T. (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) lends itself well to organizing workplace writing. To begin, learners work in teams to create a piece of writing, using the R.A.F.T. graphic organizer (shown in Figure 4). After that, they might share their writing with another pair or group of learners and eventually move to individual writing. As they continue reading and writing, their pieces will become more complex and move into pieces that they might write for or in the workplace; e.g., a description of their job skills that they can tell or send to a possible new supervisor or employer; a description of the skills and attributes of another person, which would contribute to a job review; a description of a project they are working on, which might include goals, expected outcomes, successes so far, challenges, and planned next steps.

Figure 4
R.A.F.T. writing prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>Personal story</td>
<td>Work that I do or want to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person looking for a job</td>
<td>Potential employer</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>The type of work the person would like to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Bulleted list</td>
<td>What the team accomplished today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students fill in</td>
<td>Students fill in</td>
<td>Students fill in</td>
<td>Students fill in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Make Connections Among All of the Language Skills and Job Knowledge

Lessons may span multiple days, depending on the amount of text, vocabulary, concepts, or other language components that need to be covered. Teachers may wish to consider the topics and content when selecting the mentor text and the amount of text, vocabulary, reading, and discussion to be covered. Smaller amounts of text may be needed when starting to use these activities with learners or when introducing new content. However, we must consider all of the support, discussion, language use, and content-specific practice that learners are receiving. These activities build a foundation in the new language; build the ability to use the target topic vocabulary; and tie the learning to the learners’ workplace vocabulary, oral language use, and literacy.

Throughout the lesson, learners will volunteer to orally share their sentences and partner activities (and/or visually if the technology is available) with the rest of the class. The teacher collects data, shares exemplars, and uses informal assessments (e.g., sample sentences that learners created while practicing the target vocabulary, questions they generated regarding the target topic, or summaries of what they were reading) built into the activities to reshape or revisit elements of the lesson, thus personalizing the lesson for that specific group of learners.
Learners will ideally see success outside of the class as they navigate the new language in their daily work and lives. Learners can also bring real-life examples to class of how they have used the new vocabulary and content, thus sharing (e.g., in an oral presentation done in pairs, small groups, or to the whole class) even more learning with their colleagues, and showing their success with the new learning.

Conclusion

Determining what content and vocabulary to teach, selecting texts to use, and taking learners through the process of comprehending and working with a text in a workplace literacy class can be daunting. However, the TAP model, with its seven instructional components, which include considering the needs of the learners and using their actual work and life situations to help them obtain and become successful with the new language, makes it easier. The TAP model can be used with learners with diverse language backgrounds, literacy proficiencies, and workplace experiences and goals. The components can be implemented by the teacher in the order they are presented here or in an order that suits the instructional context. Showing learners connections that they already may have with the new language and content, and providing them explicit instruction in the elements they need, will help them see that they are learning and owning the new language. Validating the new vocabulary via workplace usage will show the learners that working on the new language, at the same time that their primary language is recognized and valued, is valuable and worthwhile.

References


